DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 713 TM 028 435

AUTHOR	Pedroza, Anna
TITLE	Bordering on Success: Mexican American Students and High Stakes Testing.
PUB DATE	1998-04-00
NOTE	30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Case Studies; Dropouts; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Interviews; *Language Minorities; *Mexican Americans; Qualitative Research; School Holding Power; Spanish Speaking; Standards; *Test Bias; Test Use; Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*High Stakes Tests; *Mexico United States Border; Testing Effects; Texas

ABSTRACT

The assumptions that high-stakes testing is useful in raising educational standards for all students and that higher standards lead to higher educational performance for all students have not been tested in schools along the Texas border with Mexico. This study analyzed the effects of the high-stakes testing policy on students in a small rural school district along the border. It is a qualitative, single-case study of a border school district serving over 6,000 predominantly Mexican-American students. Quantitative school data (retention rates, dropout rates, program placement rates) and qualitative data were collected. Interviews were held with 31 teachers, 6 counselors, 10 administrators, 11 community members, and 7 school board members. Site visits were made to an elementary school designated as exemplary by the state, the intermediate school (grades 4-6), the middle school, and a low-performing high school. Findings suggest that the high stakes policy provisions have not been sensitive to the complexity of language experience in this community, where most students are "intermediate" speakers of English. Other contextual factors, such as access to mainstream experiences and the cultural exchange with Mexico, are also ignored by the testing program. Border schools, their recourses, the communities they serve, and the students' educational experiences are dramatically different from other Texas schools, and their students may not benefit from a policy that assumes that all schools are alike. (Contains 2 charts, 8 tables, and 40 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 420 713

Bordering on Success: Mexican American Students and High Stakes Testing

Presented by:
Anna Pedroza, Ph.D. Director of Department of Special Populations

San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District
500 W. Hutchison
San Marcos, Texas 78666
512-393-6933

Anna Pedroza

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

American Educational Research Association National Conference
April 13, 1998
San Diego, California

(Please do not cite without permission)

TM028435

BORDERING ON SUCCESS: MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS AND HIGH STAKES TESTING

> *To confuse change with progress is to confuse means with ends. Keeping those ends in mind, informing as they should the means in the most pervasive ways, is a responsibility that too often fades into the background in the turmoil of change. The ends become means in themselves . . . (Seymour Sarason, 1990, p. 8).*

The trend of using high-stakes testing in state accountability systems to monitor schools has been adopted nationally (Shepard, 1992) and Texas is no exception. High-stakes testing is the term used to describe assessments intended to measure public school districts' and campuses' performance and used to publicly reward or penalize them (Popham, 1987). The term "high-stakes' refers to the stakes at issue for all involved: students' graduation depends on passing the tests, campus administrators' performance evaluations depends on campus results, and entire districts' and communities' public reputations depend on student's test outcomes.

In Texas, the high-stakes exams are known as the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The assumption that *all* students benefit from the implementation of such a state policy needed to be scrutinized given its critical role as one of the fundamental assumptions underlying testing reform policies (Kirst, 1988). Other assumptions underlying the high stakes testing policy include that tests are useful in raising educational standards for all children and that higher standards lead to higher individual performance (Popham, Cruse, Ranking, Sandifer, & Williams, 1985). Additionally, an implied assumption is that communities will respond to the needs of low-performing schools and engage in changing practices to improve student performance. Critiques of these assumptions were raised in the literature but few studies have intentionally explored their validity. Even fewer studies have considered the interplay of high stakes testing policy and the socioeconomic, racial, and community contexts within which it is implemented.

Rationale for the Study

Issues concerning the socioeconomic, racial/ethnic composition of school performance in the high-stakes testing arena are magnified by the demographic context found in Texas. The enrollment of children of color in Texas surpasses the enrollment of non-minority students. Hispanic students currently comprise approximately 38% of the total student population and are the fastest growing segment of the state's population. It is this population that continues to drive statewide growth, particularly in school enrollments. The success or failure of high-stakes testing policy on this increasing segment of the population has academic, social, and economic ramifications. As noted, the effect of educational policy is seldom examined before its implementation, and limited research is done after its implementation. Analysis of school accountability data conducted by the state education agency suggested that schools with large race or ethnic minorities, language-minorities, and economically disadvantaged student populations tended to be identified as the lowest-performing schools. In 1993, for example, 90 percent of the students in the 333 individual schools identified as the state's worst performing were predominantly African-American or Hispanic students. Moreover, 80 percent of these students were identified as low-income students. Ironically, these schools may also encounter the harshest consequences

of stakes: more time spent on test preparation and less time on academic learning (Smith, Draper, Rottenberg, & Cherland, 1990; Shepard, 1991), increased student retention (Potter and Wall, 1992; Gottfredson, 1986), lower graduation rates (Archer and Dresden, 1987), and less teacher autonomy (Shepard, 1990).

Another finding in the state's analysis is that high-performing schools are rewarded with economic incentives, and schools that tended to perform well also tended to be the more affluent schools. Therefore, the examination of high-stakes testing policy on historically disenfranchised students was merited. This study proposed to examine the case of students attending a resource-bound school district situated along the Texas-Mexico border.

The second reason for examining the state's mandated testing policy centered on the fiscal costs of not only test development but the costs associated with implementing the testing policies. In 1990, the first year of TAAS testing, the testing program was allocated $7,012,921. At the end of five years, the cost had increased to $21,889,890. This fiscal cost does not take into account the financial costs encumbered by school districts who purchase TAAS-taking preparation materials, pay for additional TAAS tutorials, develop TAAS remediation courses, and pay for additional training for their teachers to develop TAAS teaching strategies.

The economic and human costs associated with implementing the policy have bearing on the policy outcomes. Schools located along the Texas-Mexico border have unique circumstances and include some of the least financially supported public school systems in Texas. Furthermore, these student populations are composed primarily of limited English proficient students participating in free and/or reduced lunch programs. Statewide accountability results suggested that schools with large numbers of linguistically or culturally diverse students and with economically challenged populations were more likely to be identified as low-performing; thus, border schools were less likely to receive exemplary status by state accountability criteria and less likely to benefit from the additional monetary rewards for high performance.

Purpose of the Study

The assumptions that high-stakes testing are useful in raising educational standards for all children and that higher standards lead to higher educational performance for all children have not been tested in schools located along the Texas-Mexico border. Border schools is a term that often refers to schools located along the Texas-Mexico border. However, school personnel in this study defined a border community as "one that has a bridge, that shares a bridge. If there is a bridge, there is proximity, access and that constant flow and exchange between Mexico and the United States". Thus, by their own definition, only five communities located in South Texas share a physical bridge linking it to a sister-city in Mexico. Schools located along the Texas-Mexico border tend to be under funded and have large numbers of limited English proficient students. Mexican-American students make up the majority of the student populations in these schools. The study's objectives were to explore the critical assumptions underlying this form of educational reform policy and to provide insight into any changes on student outcomes since the policy's inception.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to analyze the effects of high-stakes testing policy on student outcomes in a small, rural school district located along the Texas-Mexican border. The following questions guided this study:

1. What patterns of change in student achievement are evident since the implementation of high-stakes testing policy?
2. What patterns of change in student retention are evident since the implementation of high-stakes testing policy?
3. What patterns of change in student program placement are evident since the implementation of high-stakes testing policy?
4. What administrative responses to state-mandated high-stakes testing policy are evidenced by the school district?

Although many policies have been enacted as part of the state's educational reform effort, and specific reforms interact with one another, this study limits itself to examining the changes in student outcomes during the initial five-year period of high-stakes testing policy implementation. Furthermore, the study focuses only on a small rural school district located along the Texas-Mexico border which serve predominantly Mexican-American student populations.

Research Methodology

The research approach was a qualitative, single-case study of a border school district serving over 6,000 predominantly Mexican-American students. Both quantitative and qualitative were used to examine the patterns of change in student retention and placement of students in special education. Quantitative school data (retention rates, dropout rates, program placement rates) and qualitative data were collected. Primary data included: (1) in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews with 35 teachers, 10 administrators and central office staff including the superintendent; (2) two-focus group interviews with parent volunteers; (3) one focus group with school board members; (4) informal interviews with parents and community members; and (5) participant observations of two site-based decision making team meetings and two school board meetings. Secondary data sources involved the following: (1) campus and district accreditation reports; (2) campus special program compliance reports; (3) student information reported in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS); (4) school yearbooks; (5) campus and district AEIS performance reports; and (6) census documents. Additionally, historical archives, school policy documents and procedural guidelines were examined. This combination allowed for the emergence of a comprehensive understanding of the outcomes of high-stakes testing policy implementation and the diversity found in context within which it occurred.

Sixty-five individuals were interviewed during the course of the study. Of the 31 teachers interviewed, five were special education teachers and ten were bilingual or ESL teachers. Six counselors and ten administrators, including central office staff were also interviewed. Eleven community members, including parents and community leaders agreed to be nterviewed. Additionally, all seven school board members agreed to be interviewed.

Site selection began in May 1995 with the preliminary data analysis of three possible sites. Selection of the site occurred in September 1995 and field work began in October 1995. The final site visit to the district occurred in September 1996. A total of nine weeks was spent in the field. Throughout the data-collection phase, field notes and a personal journal were maintained. After field work was completed, tape-recorded interviews were transcribed. The parent interviews were conducted in Spanish and English and were thus transcribed. Categorizations of themes and content began by clustering the data into issues/concerns and response, which were further subdivided into themes: language development, instruction and curriculum, student achievement, professional development, assessment, special programs, organizational structures, and student, administrative, and community support. The final product of data analysis included the results of quantitative student and campus data using trend analysis triangulated with the perceptions of campus and community members.

Copies of the emerging themes, drafts of the texts and analysis of the quantitative data were submitted to the district's director of research and evaluation and the four campus administrators for review and comments. The intent of submitting the data analysis was to conduct member checks in order to ensure I captured the experiences, challenges, and realities of the practitioners who attempted to implement the state's high-stakes testing policy.

Description of the Site

The site was selected for three reasons: (1) the elementary campus was identified by the state as an exemplary campus in 1995 and the high school campus was identified as low performing; (2) an international bridge to Mexico was located less than two miles from the central office and elementary campuses; and (3) the district was experiencing growth. The selected site was a small school district located along the Texas-Mexico border serving predominantly Mexican-American students. The community has a long, rich historical heritage dating back to the Spanish settlements of the late 1700s. Many of the current residents of Buena Vista can trace their family roots to the original Spanish settlers. Buena Vista Independent School District (BVISD), a pseudonym, reflects the changes and the challenges of being a school in a border town community. At the time of the study, the student enrollment was approximately 6,000 students. The students enrolled in the district were identified as 99.5 percent Hispanic. Most students enrolled in the district qualified for free and/or reduced lunch (92%) and were limited English proficient (82%). Fifty-two percent of the students were receiving bilingual or English as Second-Language services.

The district has seven campuses, including a preschool campus serving children in early education and prekindergarten programs, three elementary campuses, an intermediate campus, a middle school, and a state-of-the art high school. Additionally, the district operates a dropout recovery program located on a compound of portable buildings. The study focused on four campuses: one elementary campus (K-3), the intermediate school (4-6), middle school (7-8), and high school (9-12).

The community context of the school was also viewed as important factor to consider in the site selection process for three reasons: (1) policy implementation does not occur within a social, historical, or political vacuum (Stanfield & Dennis, 1993; Easton, 1965); (2) its inclusion captured a more accurate

characterization of local residents' actions and perceptions (Foley, 1988); and (3) its inclusion gave recognition to the notion that what transpires in the policy implementation process is a political process (Easton, 1965).

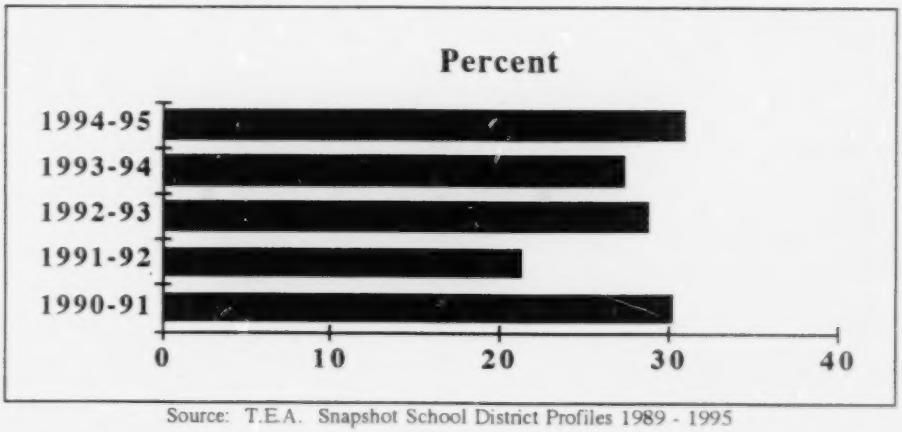
Research Findings

The study set out to explore critically the implicit and explicit assumptions underlying high-stakes testing policy. The purpose of the study was to analyze student outcomes during the initial five-year implementation period of the Texas high-stakes testing policy. Patterns of change in three student outcome areas were examined: (1) student achievement, (2) student retention, and (3) the placement of students in special education and bilingual education programs. Secondly, the campuses' and district's responses to the implementation of high-stakes testing policy and its goal to increase student achievement were also explored.

Border Student Achievement and Its Contextual Factors

The tacit assumptions underlying high-stakes policies are that tests are useful in raising educational standards for all children and that higher standards lead to higher individual performance. *Did achievement improve for the students in this border district over the five-year period of the implementation of high-stakes testing in Texas?* Using trend analysis of student results on the state's mandated tests from 1990 through 1995, the percentage of students in the district passing all tests for all grades combined increased from 30.3 percent in 1990 to 31.9 percent in 1995. After five years, almost 70 percent of the students who took the high-stakes tests continue to experience difficulty mastering all sections of the test. However, a positive gain was noted during the most recent two-year period (27.4 percent to 31.0 percent).

Chart 1: All Grades Combined: Percentage of Students Passing All Tests



Source: T.E.A. Snapshot School District Profiles 1989 - 1995

The state's accountability system includes an additional variable for determining achievement and status rating for high schools — student performance on college admissions tests. This variable is included when establishing the exemplary status of a high school campus; however, given the preponderance of evidence that

minority students tend to perform less well than non-minority students, the inclusion of this factor was deemed a disadvantage for this borderland high school.

Analysis on the performance on college admissions tests by Buena Vista students showed no achievement gains. In fact, less than two percent of the students who took the exams achieved scores at or above the passing criterion for both the SAT and the ACT examinations. Fifty-nine percent of the seniors took the college admission tests in 1990 and by 1995 close to 65 percent of the seniors participated in the college admission testing program. There was, however, a demonstrated increase in the number of students who took the college admission examinations over this period of time.

Table 1: Achievement on College Admissions Tests

	District 1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	Statewide 1994-95
% tested	59.4	70.3	75.1	80.6	64.8
% at/above criterion	1.4	3.8	1.8	1.9	17.4
SAT mean total score	804	883	765	846	885
ACT mean composite	15.8	16	15.8	15.7	20.1

When students' TAAS results were examined by grade level, gains on the state tests decreased between third and tenth grade. Third graders appeared to have a higher mastery rate (76%); the percentage of students passing the exam decreased through the middle school level (25%) and leveled off at 33 percent during high school. This pattern suggested that elementary students were faring better under the current testing system. By using cohort analysis, which gives a more meaningful picture of individual student achievement, however, most gains were noted at the high school level.

Table 2: Changes in Program Participation and Passing Rate: Cohort Grade 4 - 6 Taking the TAAS

	Grade 4	Grade 6	% Change
LEP	58%	45%	-13
ESL	0%	43%	+43
BIL ED	0%	0%	0
SPEC ED	3%	1%	-2
% Pass All Tests	20	29	+9

N = 305

Table 3 Changes in Program Participation and Passing Rate: Cohort Grade 5-6 Taking the TAAS

	Grade 5	Grade 6	% Change
LEP	55%	45%	-10
ESL	0%	43%	+43
BIL ED	52%	0%	-52
SPEC ED	3%	2%	-1
% Pass All Tests	28	29	-1

N=198

Table 4: Changes in Program Participation and Passing Rate: Cohort Grade 6-7 Taking the TAAS

	Grade 6	Grade 7	% Change
LEP	60%	48%	-12
ESL	51%	45%	-6
BIL ED	0%	0%	0
SPEC ED	1%	1%	0
% Pass All Tests	23	24	+1

N=202

Table 5: Changes in Program Participation and Passing Rate: Cohort Grade 7 - 8 Taking the TAAS

	Grade 7	Grade 8	% Change
LEP	52%	42%	-10
ESL	47%	39%	-8
BIL ED	1%	0%	-1
SPEC ED	1%	0%	-1
% Pass All Tests	29	15	-14

N=185

Table 6: Changes in Program Participation and Passing Rate: Cohort Grade 8 - 10 Taking the TAAS

	Grade 8	Grade 10	% Change
LEP	35%	34%	-1
ESL	35%	4%	-31
BIL ED	0%	0%	0
SPEC ED	0%	0%	0
% Pass All Tests	18	39	+21

N=230

Ironically, the elementary campus of this district had been identified as exemplary by the state, and the high school as low performing. Once again, the exemption provisions in the state's testing policy emerged as playing a key role in the outcomes of the campuses' ratings and the pattern of student performance at lower levels.

Exemption from the testing program emerged as a factor in the analysis of reported campus performance. Two specific campuses illustrated how exemptions played out at the micropolitical level. Buena Vista Elementary was recognized by the state as an exemplary campus for two consecutive years. Buena Vista High School was identified as a low-performing campus. The findings in this study suggest that elementary campus staff have more available options for exempting students from the TAAS than the high school staff for two reasons: A Spanish version of the TAAS was an option at the elementary campus level and limited English proficient students were more apt to qualify for the three-year exemption in their early school years. By the time students reached the high school, exemption options tend to be exhausted. In fact, the only exemptions available for high school students were provisions found in the individual education plans (IEP) for students receiving special education services or a one time exemption for recent immigrants. Consequently, achievement gains at the high school level become more meaningful because more students were actually tested.

This raised the possibility that the TAAS exam is a measure of how well the more English proficient students performed, especially for students at the elementary level. The test was given only to those third graders who were deemed to have the English proficiency skills necessary to take the TAAS exam in English. In Texas, only the English TAAS results are considered in the accountability formula. Thus, in Buena Vista Elementary

nearly 60 percent of the third grade students were exempted from the test because of its large number of limited English proficient students. This meant that the school's rating was based on approximately 40 percent of third graders, or 54 students. The exemplary rating was based on a small group of students who were more English proficient than their peers. The high school did not have any LEP exemptions; therefore, its rating was based on a much larger percentage of the school's student enrollment.

The study identified another unintended outcome related to the use of exemptions: the impression of dramatic decreases in scores between campuses. For example, it was found that upon initial examination, scores from the elementary campus to the intermediate campus appeared to decrease dramatically (65% passing at the elementary level to 23% at the intermediate level in 1993-94). When the fact that the elementary scores were based on a small number of students (54 students) and the scores at the intermediate level included more than 200 students, however, the scores took on new meaning. The decreased scores gave the illusion that student academic performance had declined from the previous year; but, in fact, more students were included in the testing program for the first time and may have also received differentiated instruction the prior year in the form of Spanish instruction, vocabulary development, and test preparation.

The quantitative test results challenged the explicit purpose of high-stakes testing policy. Interviews with the teachers, administrators, and community members further corroborated the results of the quantitative data. Their general consensus was that student performance on the test had not increased in the past five years. Had all Buena Vista students benefited from the implementation of this policy? *The findings strongly contradicted the policy's explicit assumptions that testing benefited all students. Students' academic performance had not increased.* In the opinions of Buena Vista educators and community members, what factors accounted for this low level of student performance?

Micropolitical Context Factors and Student Performance. The sociolinguistic context of the community was identified by participants across the district as being a major influence on students' academic outcomes. Buena Vista schools were located less than a mile away from the international bridge and the majority of the community residents were reported to be Spanish speakers (93% according to the U.S. Census of 1990). Although the majority of residents are native to Starr County, life in Buena Vista is strongly influenced by the international culture and customs of life in a border community. Social and business life in Buena Vista is conducted mostly in Spanish. In the 1990 U.S. Census report, approximately 60 percent reported they could not speak English well. However, the number of Spanish speakers was reported to be decreasing. In 1980, the U.S. Census report indicated that 96 percent of Buena Vista residents reported to be Spanish speakers.

Within this sociolinguistic context, the English language development of students dominated teachers' conversations. Language permeated their discussions regarding instruction, curriculum, cognitive and academic skill development and program design. Teachers were primarily concerned with the limited opportunities students had to practice and use English. For many students, the time spent in school was their primary opportunity for English language skills development. Students in the primary grades were identified as being predominantly Spanish speakers. Although elementary teachers expressed concerns about the test's emphasis on English and the

conflicting nature of English language development, teachers at the middle and high school campuses also saw this issue as a major contributing factor to student low performance on the TAAS examinations. Coupled with peer pressure and adolescent angst regarding "sounding different" or "looking silly", older students demonstrated a reluctance to speak English outside of the classroom. Therefore, English language skills at the secondary level were not fully developed for many students due partly to the combination of adolescent social factors and the sociolinguistic context of the community.

An implicit assumption made by teachers and policymakers is that students at the secondary level *were* English dominant language speakers. According to district data, however, the majority of LEP students at the high school level were identified as beginning English speakers (41%) or intermediate speakers (24%). *Only 35 percent of high school students identified as LEP were functioning at the advanced English proficiency level.* These figures did not include the 561 students identified as LEP who filed parent denial forms and were not receiving services through the ESL program.

Teachers affirmed that learning English is possible for students, but the sociolinguistic context and the high-stakes environment presented unique challenges for both teachers and students. Issues related to language proficiency continued to be a barrier in assessing student performance. Vocabulary, cognitive and concept development, assessment and transition into an all English curricula and instructional setting were identified as major challenges for this district, especially given the constant ebb and flow of students enrolling in this international educational context. The sociolinguistic context of the community and the limited opportunity of students to engage in English development activities appeared to be a major influence in the cognitive and academic development of Buena Vista students.

Educational Contextual Factors. The diversity of factors which contributed to the acquisition of English and the development of English cognitive skills played a dominant role in how LEP students were prepared for the TAAS exams at the different campus levels. Elementary teachers were primarily bilingual teachers engaged in instructional interactions with a predominantly Spanish dominant group of students functioning as non-English speakers or beginning English speakers. Recent immigrants as well as students native to the area are not distinguished from one another nor do they receive differentiated instruction in the elementary classrooms.

However, this instructional design began to change as students moved through the upper grades. Not only did the number of limited English proficient students decrease from an average of 84% at the elementary campus to 47% at the high school, but the type of program and services also changed. Bilingual education with an emphasis on Spanish instruction and ESL development shifted to a primarily ESL focus at the middle and high school campuses. Students' opportunities to develop cognitive skills in their native language decreased at the same time the academic skills necessary for success at the higher educational levels increased in complexity. Since the bilingual program philosophy favored transition, students who were transitioning into an all English curriculum encountered in the state's examinations which increased in complexity each year and required more sophisticated knowledge of English. The levels of English skills required to demonstrate mastery were often far

more advanced than intermediate English speakers or even advanced English speakers might be expected to command.

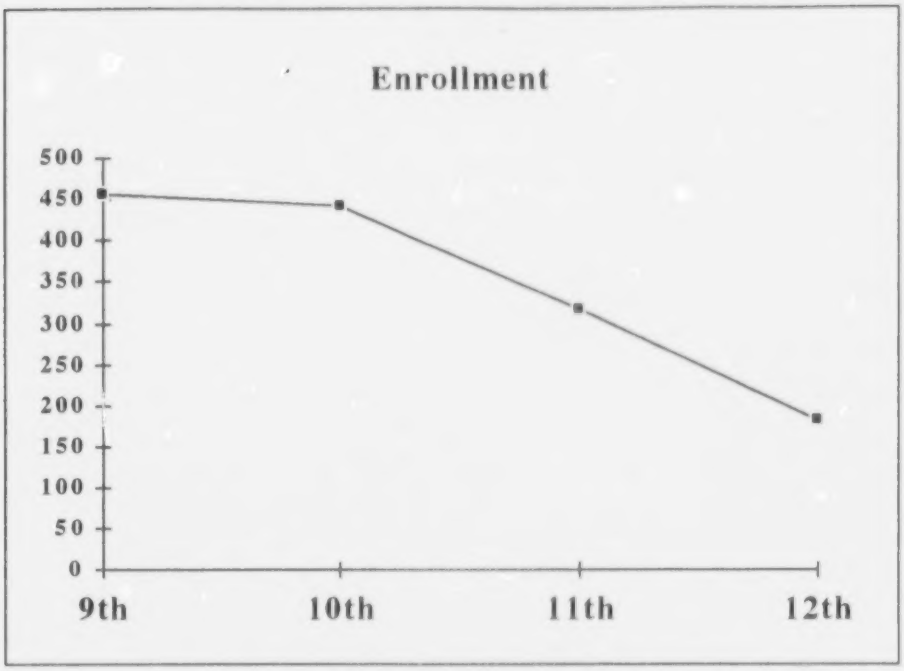
The learning and teaching environments in these border school classrooms appeared to be adversely affected by the presence of high-stakes testing in this district. Teachers recognized the paradox of using developmentally appropriate instruction and teaching isolated facts and skills to students. Both elementary and intermediate teachers struggled with the tension of balancing the implementation of "whole language" philosophy with the counter-philosophical orientation of "discrete-skill" teaching such as those found in the TAAS preparation materials they were given to use in their classroom. Interviews with the secondary teachers confirmed the prevalence of this challenge. These teachers reported they would teach differently and spend more time teaching skills and concepts rather than test-taking strategies. Some teachers questioned whether students were really learning. Others questioned whether the lessons students were internalizing. "learn enough to pass a test but not learn enough to excel," was the one we wanted to intentionally reinforce.

Instructional Program Quality. Student achievement is dependent on the quality of classroom instruction as much as the quality of the overall instructional program. This includes the quality of teachers as well as the quality and availability of instructional materials. Although efforts had been undertaken in the past ten years to improve educational program quality in Buena Vista, program quality continued to be a challenge, especially for bilingual and ESL programming. Employment of certified teachers in the areas of special education, bilingual education, and ESL was a major problem for the district. During the past six years, the percentage of teachers in the district with special permits decreased. However, the district had previously relied on teachers with special permits due to the remote location of the district and low teacher salaries.

Access to instructional materials, professional development, and qualified (certified) teachers emerged as other overlooked contextual factors in the border school community. For example, bilingual elementary teachers experienced difficulty gaining access to quality Spanish instructional materials. This was especially true for teachers who were looking for Spanish TAAS preparation materials comparable to the commercial TAAS materials found in English. Teachers, especially new teachers to the district and community, had not had access to professional development opportunities to gain a better understanding of the cultural backgrounds of the students, of the test requirements and of the policy provisions.

All these factors compounded over time and contributed to the long-term cumulative effect of ineffective instruction and language and academic skill development. This presented a major challenge across all grade levels, but particularly at the high school where the highest stakes were found: have students complete course requirements necessary to graduate, increase their school attendance and attrition rates, and have students demonstrate mastery on the TAAS in order to graduate. All these requirements included a high level of English proficiency and academic skills. However, the study found that when trend analysis was used to examine student enrollment patterns across grade levels, across program assignment, and across age cohorts, the pattern of decrease student presence was noted.

Chart 2: Enrollment By Grade Level (Buena Vista High School)



Source: District Attendance Report, Jan. 31, 1996

Test Instrument Mismatch. The study also found that Buena Vista participants, including board members and the community, perceived the test itself to contribute to students' low performance. For example, teachers identified test vocabulary as a factor affecting students' low performance on the state's high-stakes exam. The use of "dominant, mainstream vocabulary" was perceived by teachers to be problematic because the vocabulary was unfamiliar to students. Not only was the vocabulary unfamiliar to students because of their sociocultural context, but the vocabulary alignment across programs and campuses was also identified as problematic.

The overall consensus of participants was that students knew more than what the test scores indicated. The tests were considered biased or inappropriate for their students and they raised concerns about the validity of the tests to measure students' performance given the diversity of students' language, the differentiated instruction given to special education and Spanish dominant students, and the lack of students' familiarity with some concepts assumed to be "mainstream" by test developers.

Student Retention and Limited English Proficient Students

A critical assumption of House Bill 72 and subsequent reform policies was that standards motivate students to perform and the threat of failure to meet those standards inspires students. What happened to students who failed to meet those standards? *What patterns of change in student retention are evident since the implementation of high-stakes testing policy?*

One possible consequence raised in the literature was retention. Another consequence was the use of remedial strategies "to be used for students who fail to be promoted, but are not retained, or who otherwise are considered to be 'at-risk' for academic reasons" (Policy Handbook, EIE, p. 1).

One such remedial strategy used in the district was *placing* students rather than promoting or retaining them. Generally, promotion is reserved for students who have completed their course work with satisfactory grades, i.e., 70 and above. *Placing* means students may not have received passing grades but are placed in the next grade because of other factors. Placing students was considered an act in compliance with State Board of Education rules.

An identified drawback in the local policy was its failure to address explicitly retention for grades 9 through 12. At the high school level, the policy simply addressed alternative, remedial, and compensatory strategies available for students determined to be at risk of dropping out. Yet, the state report on grade level retention of students between 1992 and 1994 indicated that grade 9 produced the greatest number of retainees (Texas Education Agency, 1995). More students were found to be retained statewide in the high school grades than at the elementary or middle school levels. Another noteworthy observation, was that the AEIS documents reported retention rates for grades 1-8, but did not report retention rates for high school grades.

It was difficult to identify trends in grade-level retention because retention data were only available for three years. The difficulty of analysis was compounded by changes in data collection following the first year which left only two years of valid data. Using AEIS data reports for these two school years, the analysis suggested that retention patterns decreased for Buena Vista students through the eighth grade. Retention of students at the elementary and intermediate campus levels had not increased as the literature suggested.

High school retention data were derived using the TEA report, 1994-95 Year-End Status with Retention Reason. Analysis of this data suggested that although 226 secondary students were identified as *not advanced next grade*, an additional 260 students were identified as *pending completion of summer school*. The possibility of high school students not advancing to the next level was confirmed by a subsequent TEA analysis issued in the fall of 1996 (1994-1995 Report on Grade Level Retention, September 1996). Although the number of secondary students designated as *not advanced* initially appeared limited, when coupled with other year-end status labels such as summer placement, the number of secondary students not being advanced nearly increased from 226 to 486 students.

Data analysis suggested that Buena Vista had not extensively adopted the practice of retaining students. However, when grade-level enrollment was examined by moving cohorts of students across time, certain enrollments burgeoned over time while others decreased.

There were several possibilities raised for this notable pattern of change: retention, an increase of new students, and/or overage students. The data for Buena Vista students through grade eight did not support the practice of retention. The rate of new students did not account for the bulge of students in the intermediate years nor the decline of student enrollment as students progress through their high school program. However, the data did suggest an increase in the number of high school students *not advanced* or *pending completion of summer*

school. Therefore, the phenomena of overage students, in particular at the secondary level, emerged as a factor requiring further exploration.

Over-age Students as a Remedial Practice. The number of overage students was identified by using the 1990 - 1994 state Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data. The number of overage students consistently declined between the eleventh and twelfth grades. A pattern emerged from the data indicating an increase of overage students as grade level increased. This was indicative that placing students in grade levels was an ongoing practice in the district.

Table 7: Percentage of Overage Students by Grade Level (1990-1994)

Grade Level	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	% Change
3	11.9	5.6	6.9	4.08	3.16	-73
5	10.4	11.6	10.4	8.3	10.2	-2
7	26.3	22.3	17.3	14.2	16.6	-37
11	29.8	26.0	26.7	32.8	25.3	-15
12	NA	NA	27.1	22.3	25.7	-5

The practice of placing students in the grade level below was regarded by district personnel as an appropriate instructional strategy to remediate deficit skills in English language development, reading, or writing for limited English proficient students. Thus, placing of students was viewed as "helping" students and "extending" the time for them to further develop their skills. The practice was especially considered beneficial for students in middle school and high school where content and process skills are more advanced and complex. It was perceived as a way of allowing the students time to "catch up" with language and academic skills. Additionally, it was viewed as a way of providing secondary students additional time to earn necessary credits. This accounted for the increase of overage students at specific "entry" grade levels such as seventh and ninth grades. Unfortunately, the resulting pattern for overage students mirrored that of retained students: the numbers of students dramatically declined by the time they reached twelfth grade. These students were found to be unaccounted for in the enrollment figures.

Had retention increased for Buena Vista students? The data findings suggest that student retention had not increased during the first five years of policy implementation, but there was a noted increase in the number of students being placed in grades. Therefore, the assumption that high-stakes testing policy motivates student to achieve was once again challenged by this finding. Although the pattern of increased retention did not emerge as a practice, one of *placing* students did. *Placing* students as a remediation strategy had the same deleterious effect as that of retention - the phenomena of unaccounted students over time.

Placement of Students in Special Programs

This study reviewed two special program areas: programs serving students with disabilities and programs serving limited English proficient students, including bilingual education, ESL and recent immigrant programs. The program areas were selected for study because the literature review had suggested that provisions in

the high-stakes testing policy allowing exemptions of students served in these programs encouraged over-placement (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992; Beattie, et al., 1982; McKinney, et al., 1980).

Had student enrollment in special education and programs serving limited English proficient students increased in Buena Vista during the five-year period of policy implementation? The findings suggest that for special education students, this was not the case for the district. Students being served in special education increased one percent during this time period. The number of students participating in the district's bilingual education program increased by seven percent over the same five years period.

When data analysis of student achievement considered their placement in special programs (Special Education and Special Language Development Programs), two patterns emerged: a decrease in the number of limited English proficient students taking the TAAS test as student cohorts moved through the system and a decrease in the number of students who received special education services taking the TAAS test. The use of exemptions and special program placements emerged again as factors to consider.

The literature suggested that increased accountability pressures from high-stakes testing promote the questionable practice of placing students in special education although analysis of special program enrollment trends strongly suggested that educators in Buena Vista did not promote it. However, since special education services vary according to the disability condition of the student, it was deemed important to analyze changes within the different special education categories and ages of students.

Enrollment in three disabilities categories were closely examined: mental retardation (MR), speech impairment (SH), and learning disability (LD). As of December 1, 1995, the *statewide* figures for students identified as having these disabilities and receiving services were: emotional disturbance (8.28%), speech impairment (15.67%), and learning disability (60.31). Students with learning disabilities and speech impairments in Buena Vista consistently made up over 80 percent of the total number of students receiving special education services during the five-year period. Unlike the state average of 8 percent of students being identified as having an emotional disability, Buena Vista had a significantly small number of students identified as such (.3%).

A noteworthy pattern was that students identified as speech impaired decreased as students got older whereas, the number of students identified as learning disabled increased until students reached the age of 17. The number of learning disabled students decreased an average of 37 percent once students reached 17 years or older. Both these patterns mirrored entrenched trend patterns identified at the state level. *The efficacy of high-stakes testing policies changing entrenched state patterns in special education programs was raised. Although the testing policy had not increased student placement in this district, it had also not altered the prior patterns of student placement.* The patterns continue to reflect past practice statewide and locally regarding placement and identification of students with speech and learning disabilities.

When the decrease of students with learning disabilities who are over 17 years-old is coupled with the results of the cohort analysis of eighth and ninth grade students receiving special education services, a pattern of losing students receiving special education services emerges.

Table 8: Comparison of Student Cohorts in Special Education - 9th Graders and 12th Graders

Grade Level	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91	1992-93
9th	18	27	31	41	34
	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95
12th	11	14	20	17	18
% Decrease	39	48	36	59	47

The loss of special education students ranges from 37 percent to 54 percent depending on which analysis is used. Regardless of the analysis, students receiving special education services have not fared well in the past five years of high-stakes testing. Not only are these students often exempted from the tests, but large numbers of students "disappear" from the service rolls without having been being dismissed from special education programs.

District-wide, students with disabilities decrease in numbers as they progress through the education system. Several reasons may account for this decrease of students, including students exiting the program and students dropping out of school. When inquired about this phenomena, a district central office staff member shared the following observations:

> 5.3: I couldn't help you on that. In fact, that's a very good question. I have never really given that consideration. There is a tremendous drop out. So, I would say the same that affects the entire population is affecting special ed students. We have a tremendous drop out from the junior high (the middle school) and the high school. That is where the biggest challenge is. That's when the gap really widens. The student is in the seventh, sixth grade, eighth grade and his academic skills are one, two, three. The disparity there, it is widening and widening and is frustrating . . .

The decreasing numbers of students receiving special education services cannot be dismissed nor can this factor be separated from the issues related to language acquisition and the border community context.

Limited English Proficiency and Program Placement

The term limited English Proficient (LEP) refers to students who are not yet at a near-native or native level of proficiency in listening, speaking, and/or reading and writing (Cisneros & Leone, 1995). Students with limited English proficiency are not a homogeneous group of students. There is great diversity among their academic, linguistic, sociocultural, and educational experiences. Factors which contribute to the diversity of academic skills and school success include: (1) when students begin to learn English, (2) the degree of their English proficiency, (3) the degree of their communicative skills in Spanish, (4) the educational and socioeconomic levels of their parents, (5) the length of time they have resided in the United States and (6) their formal schooling experience (Hewlett-Gomez & Solis, 1995).

Overall, the average number of identified limited English proficient students peaked at 84% at Buena Vista's elementary campus and decreased to 66% at the intermediate level. Approximately 50% of the students at the middle school were identified as having limited English proficiency and an average of 47% were found to be enrolled at the high school campus. Therefore, a major finding in this study is that at any given grade level, at least half of the students in this district will be engaged in the English language acquisition process and encountering language transition dilemmas.

Several key patterns emerged in the study. First, the number of limited English proficient students identified district wide remained generally constant over the past five years, ranging between 60 and 64 percent.

The number of LEP students was greatest at the elementary campus level (84%) and decreased as students moved through the academic program. This trend would be expected given the high percentage of Spanish speakers in the community and the age of students served at the elementary level (K-3). The number of identified limited English proficient students had increased at the intermediate campus, particularly over the past two years. It was posited that the increase was due to a greater emphasis to better serve students and to availability of Spanish TAAS at the fourth and fifth grade level. Teacher interviews support both these contentions. Teacher interviews support both these contentions as illustrated by the following exchanges with intermediate staff members:

> 2.11: Last school year, well, taking into consideration we had two grade levels, u m . . . our fourth grade, in fact, did very, very well. And, our fifth grade didn't do as well. But, one of the reasons for that was at fourth grade we were able to claim a lot of exemptions. Which is another game you play with this TAAS test that I have a gripe about. You go to these blue ribbon schools and you're thinking, "Gol, ' how do they do it? They have all these LEP children like we do." But they learned to play the game. *You can exempt students.* You know? You can have a class of three hundred and some students and test a hundred. Which is one-third. And so what you do with them, you hand pick your best one-third kids—of course, you're going to shine. But what about the other two hundred?
>
> AP: Um hum.
>
> 2.11: What if you had tested them? So, what happened to us last year, was that the previous year in fourth grade, we had not exempted. We had chosen to test. So, then last school year in fifth grade, we had to test those kids. So, there was a large percentage of kids tested and in fourth grade we were able to be more selective on who we were going to test. So, that accounts for it. You know?
>
> AP: Oh, because there's a one-time exemption?
>
> 2.11: Um . . . for recent immigrants. There's a three-year exemption that you can follow. And then also, I don't know how familiar you are with bilingual, but there's category within the bilingual program: there's beginning bilingual students, intermediate bilingual students, and advanced. And with the beginners and intermediate, you can choose to test or not to test for exit purposes. And since the majority of our kids are in the bilingual program . . . you know? I think we did very well though last year with our process of selecting the students. Like I told you a while a go. We had the data on the pre-testing throughout the year. A teacher would come to us and tell us, "Well, this one should test very exit purposes. I really think he can do it." And we'd say, "Well, good. Back it up. Show us your data." We don't want to frustrate them if they're not ready just because we want to test them for exit. So, we were right on the dot about most of them. Most of the ones that we tested did pass and so they're non-LEP. Which is good. You want them in that situation. But, then again, it's like I tell you, you're just playing the game that the state is allowing you to.

Another staff member corroborates the above observations by stating:

> 2.21: On this campus we've known even within our school district, for some of these schools, you know, even at grade level we only test, and I've seen it in reports from some of the schools that are recognized, if they have a population, you know, a small population to begin with, if it's a small campus, it's, you know, there's few students on it. And they only test those students which are nonLEP, there's a lot of exemptions for example. And they're probably justifiable exemptions. I'm not saying that they're doing something that's against the law. But, they take, you know, or try to see if those students which qualify for the exemption. You know. Here, we had never done that. Why, I don't know, but I know that at intermediate we tested almost everybody. We just tested them. That's what we did. And our scores showed it. And then last year, we exempted students who could be exempt. And we noted that our exemptions were a bit high. And there was concern. There was like, "Hey, is that right? Are we exempting too many?" We would get questioning whether those kids really had needed to be exempted, but according to our LPAC minutes and everything was justifiable. It was just that we couldn't believe ourselves that we were exempting. And

> we really didn't exempt that many students in comparison to other schools that are the size that we are.

The most notable increase in services occurred at the high school level where the identification of LEP students jumped from 43 percent to 60 percent in four years. Although the number of high school students identified as being limited English proficient increased, not all of these students were receiving services. Three factors were posited as reasons for the discrepancy between identified LEP students and students receiving services. The first factor was the high number of parent denials documented at the high school level. The nature of high school programming and the ability of high school students to consent to services were two reasons offered as plausible explanations. Another factor was the structure of course requirements for graduation. Language minority students are inadvertently limited to two years of ESL course work due to the state requirement of two years of English needed for graduation. This condition was supported by the counselors who reviewed students' credits and designed their schedules. Finally, the decrease of students with limited English proficiencies not receiving services at the upper division levels may simply be another reflection of the pattern of unaccounted students which was found in the statistics relating to achievement, enrollment trends, overage students, and special education student enrollment.

Coupled with the high numbers of LEP students enrolled in Buena Vista schools, the on-going arrival of recent immigrants, graduation course requirements that discourage the continuation of ESL services and the changes in provisions governing exemptions between the elementary grade levels and high school, the intersection of students' academic and language development with Buena Vista's sociolinguistic context and sociocontext (the border context) illustrates the complexity of implementing political, legislated educational reform and expecting educational changes in the form of increased student achievement.

Administrative Response to High-Stakes Testing

The success of the testing policy is dependent on the implicit assumption that school and public reaction to low student performance would lead to changes in pedagogical, organizational, and structural changes as a result of their engagement in the school improvement process. The last research question identified key changes and innovations made as a response to low student performance on the state's high-stakes test.

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test results were not well-received by the district. In the past five years, the district did respond to the challenge of increasing student scores and meeting the accountability standards by implementing various initiatives, revising programs and procedures, and adopting new philosophies with the intent of improving student learning. Three broad responses by the district were identified: (1) improvement of educational programs and strategies, (2) change in organizational structures, and (3) changes in student, administrative, and community support.

Pedagogical improvement initiatives targeted five areas of improvement: students' skill development, instruction and curriculum, parental involvement, special programs and high-stakes testing preparation

activities. Educational programming and instructional strategies targeting the improvement of student performance on the state's high-stakes tests were given priority by district staff across the district. Initiatives varied across the different campuses but, generally addressed factors perceived to hinder student learning such as language proficiency, low academic skills, and test preparation. For example, various initiatives to increase English proficiency were implemented. These included the elementary campus' English campaign, the intermediate and middle schools' efforts to integrate ESL methodologies into the general education classrooms, and the high school's creation of the Recent Immigrant classes. The English campaign at the elementary school encouraged teachers, parents, and students to listen to English songs at home and school, to strengthen the ESL program in the classrooms, and to encourage campus staff to speak English when engaged in informal social situations. The program's intent on the other campuses was to integrate ESL instructional methods within the classroom setting as well as outside by providing separate ESL classes recent immigrant students. Some teachers questioned the efficacy of providing 45 minutes of ESL instruction to students as opposed to making ESL an instructional priority to be addressed throughout the curriculum.

Efforts aimed at improving student performance also included the initiating of new instructional courses and teaching arrangements. For example, the high school principal's policy included assigning his most experienced teachers to teach freshmen and sophomore classes in order to ensure that students were given the best learning opportunities prior to taking the TAAS. New courses such as Project Read and Math were created to provide students who failed the exam with additional instruction. A shift in pedagogical philosophy which supported the use of more dynamic teaching strategies was noted at the central office and campus level by teachers.

Parent involvement in education was regarded as critical to school improvement. For example, at the elementary campus, parents met with teachers and administrators frequently. They also met in groups with other parents to discuss TAAS objectives, share learning activities that reinforced learning at home, and to plan activities to motivate students to continue improving. The district hired parents to visit homes, to tutor students, and to initiate personally recovery efforts for school-age parents who desired and qualified for high school studies. The creation of the mobile computer unit was another effort on the part of the school to involve parents as learning partners. The mobile unit was assigned to various community neighborhoods, colonias or barrios, throughout the week to take resources out to the community. The computer unit contained computers with different software and included paraprofessionals assigned to assist students and parents in using the computers to do classroom assignments, conduct research, or develop literacy skills.

Improvement in the quality of services and access had also improved. For example, the creation of the ALAS program — a dropout recovery campus — was strongly supported by the community. The program had a waiting list of students desiring to return and complete their high school credits. This program was a district response to the large number of students that left the district prior to graduating. Improvement in special education programs included additional special education teachers at the campus level and increased efforts to hire only certified special education teachers in the district. The district also hired a bilingual director to oversee the

changes being implemented in the language acquisition programs, developed a scope and sequence for the ESL curriculum, and had increased the professional development offerings for teachers.

The district had increased resources devoted to the acquisition of TAAS instructional materials. TAAS-focused software, commercially prepared TAAS reviews and practice tests, as well as the formatting of local tests were some of the ways TAAS was observed to be an important part of classroom instruction. However, teachers reported experiencing conflict with the heavy focus on TAAS and concern on the emphasis on discrete skills.

There were other negative outcomes reported by teachers regarding some of the adopted responses. For example, some teachers recognized that the English skills needed by students were not being adequately addressed by the changes in the ESL program. Courses designed to provide students with the remediation skills necessary to master the TAAS experienced different levels of success in meeting their intended purpose. For example, teachers did not consider the Project Read or Project Math classes effective given their large student enrollment loads, the restrictive nature of the design which limited their flexibility (switching from classroom to labs), the negative incentive for students (taking two similar content courses), the inconsistent criteria used to place students in the classes and the phenomena of students mentally dropping out from the course after the TAAS exams were administered. Ultimately, some of the initiatives were corrupted by their implementation. Unintended results included the perception that TAAS classes were a waste of time and the decrease in student motivation. Finally, the routinized classwork inherent in TAAS preparation activities and rote learning reinforced by the emphasis on the test led teachers to express concern about students dropping out, learning only enough to pass a test, and about their own experiences of teaching in a high-stakes environment.

Organizational Changes as a Response. Several purposeful organizational changes were identified in the study including: 1) reduce student-teacher ratios and 2) increase communication and interaction opportunities among campus staff, the campus administrators, and the district leadership team. The district implemented several changes in their attempt to create environments which facilitated communication among teachers and administrators, including the reduction of student-teacher ratios. The elementary campus was divided into three smaller campuses, each with their own administrator, special education teacher, and counselor. The intermediate campus divided itself into a school-within-a-school model and the middle school adopted an academic teaming model. The high school campus adopted a block schedule model which increased the instructional time devoted to student instruction.

A second organizational change was the district's new focus on open communication. The focus on improving communication included not only teachers but the students. A more inclusive philosophy was adopted and the homogenous grouping of students was challenged. The district, thus began implementing heterogeneous grouping at all the campuses, except the high school. Teachers described the advantages of heterogeneous grouping to include: (1) increased learning opportunities for limited English proficient students; (2) increased learning opportunities for low achieving students; and (3) opportunities for all students to engage in higher-level instructional programming lessons.

The new superintendent's philosophy on communication was also evident in the weekly administrator meetings, his open door policy, and the central office newsletter that was distributed to all district staff. Principals were given campus responsibility for decision making and charged with improving student performance on their campuses. Campus site-based team meetings were one way that campuses were able to assume leadership roles and improve the communication between the community and the campus. Thus, communication between parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, and students played an important role in the new interactions expected and encouraged by the school superintendent. This was a major change from the closed communication system that supported the more traditional, authoritative nature of the previous administration.

Several changes in educational policy, practices and philosophy were adopted by the district administration leadership and were supported by teachers, parents, and the community, including school board members. Some of the changes were directed towards ameliorating environmental conditions or removing institutional barriers that were thought to hinder student academic success. Others were intended to heighten the organizational strengths and positive outcomes already being manifested as a result of previously enacted policy changes and implemented practices. The dire condition of student learning and the subsequent changes identified as necessary to increase student performance required school personnel and the community to make not only an educational paradigmatic shift, but required political changes as well. Political changes included the election of new school board members, the selection of a new superintendent, the allocation of authority to the campus principals, and the active participation of teachers via the campus site-based decision-making teams.

Changes in student, administrative and community support and the scope of that support were also made in the five-year period. For example, four primary avenues were identified in the study which provided support for students, especially those who were deemed at-risk of failing the TAAS: the creation of specialized courses, the provision of summer school, the development of new organized school activities, and the implementation of student incentive programs. Administrative changes identified in the district during the five-year period included: 1) the addition of school personnel, 2) the shift of decision-making power to the campuses, 3) the focus on professional development, and 4) the change in superintendency.

Administrative support was evidenced in the addition of new school personnel, such as the reading specialists, special education teachers, and the deans of instruction. Administrators supported teachers by securing instructional materials, conducting classroom observations, meeting with parents, arranging professional development opportunities, and providing morale support.

The access to power was also changed. Principals and the site-based teams were given the responsibility and power to make changes on their campuses to improve student learning. High-stakes testing policy was also credited as the impetus for changing the political makeup of the board. In 1993, the newly elected board hired Mr. Waterson and began a systematic and comprehensive school improvement process. Until that time, the board had supported such educational endeavors as the building of a new high school and the allocation of funds for the new middle school and elementary campus. Board support was evident in the form of facility improvements but was

perceived as lacking in instructional focus by some members of the community. The election of new board members marked a political shift as well as a philosophical shift in educational policy and the appointment of the new superintendent intensified the community's commitment to improvement.

Professional development was central to the administration team's school improvement plan. Opportunities for professional development included attending conferences, on-site training, visiting other campuses, and participation in the state's Texas School Improvement Initiative as site visitors to other districts. Access to these professional opportunities were equally available to the men and women in the district, counter to prior practice.

Much of the credit for the philosophical and governance changes was given to the new superintendent and his administrative team. The change in superintendency was identified as the fourth major administrative change in the district. A political shift in the community was identified as a pivotal event in the change process by some teachers, administrators, and parents. For some people, the replacement of the previous superintendent was a political response by the community to the TAAS performance of Buena Vista students and the accountability policy. The publicity of low scores, the identification of the middle and high school as low performing, and the increasing state focus on dropout rates raised questions about instructional effectiveness in the district. Additionally, the surrounding communities had increased in population and consequently shifted the old locus of political power.

Had the district responded to the challenges of increasing student performance on the high-stakes test? High-stakes testing was identified as an impetus for the political changes that resulted in the appointment of the new superintendent, the board's support for filling new district personnel positions, and for adopting a more open, participatory governance structure. The district had also responded to the challenge of increasing student performance by supporting new instructional and curricular initiatives. These initiatives varied in quality and effectiveness and were deemed more successful than others. Still other challenges, especially the English skill development of students, were not adequately addressed and the district continues to explore ways to implement educational reform policies.

Discussion of Findings

The theoretical rationale underlying high-stakes testing policies is rooted in philosophical presumptions which link legislated high academic standards and expected high performance for all students. High-stakes testing programs emerged from the national trend of "legislating learning" (Wise, 1979) as yet another way to demonstrate to the public that measures are being undertaken to "solve" an educational crisis. Thus, educational policy efforts to mandate learning have taken the forms of accountability requirements for schools, program planning documentation requirements, yearly program evaluations, and competency examinations. These types of educational policy requirements focus on output expectations to measure gains in educational standards and their results are made public. The Texas policy encompasses both a state accountability

aspect and competency measures, as well as public reporting of student outcomes. The intent of the policy is that of bringing about educational change.

Russel (1988), Fullan (1990), and Sarason (1991) raised the possibility that emerging reforms were another way of simply intensifying what we have already been doing. Fullan (1991) refers to this intensification as "the increased definition of curriculum, mandated textbooks, standardized tests tightly aligned with curriculum, specification of teaching and administrative methods backed up by evaluation, and monitoring all serve to intensify as exactly as possible the what and how of teaching (p. 7)." I contend that high-stakes testing in an extension of Russel's (1988) and Fullan's proposition and that the policy as it is being implemented in the state has not necessarily had the desired effect.

The policy has two tacit assumptions: (1) high-stakes tests are useful in raising educational standards for all children and, (2) higher standards lead to higher individual performance. Implied in the policy is that communities would respond to the needs of low-performing schools and engage in changing practices to improve student performance. Sarason convincingly argues in his work, Revisiting the Culture of the School and the Problem of Change, that "reforms that seek to correct symptoms without first addressing causes are doomed (p. 358). Fullan stresses that "high regulation and high monitoring can achieve minimal compliance at best. This may be necessary in situations that are so bad that the most basic conditions do not exist, but regulatory approaches cannot accomplish basic reform" (p. 270). Both scholars concur that change requires the recognition and understanding of the culture of schools and the complex, interrelated relationships found within the schools and outside of them. Another commonalty is the recognition that educational change must include changing the way people in the system and outside of it relate with each other. For Sarason, the failure or success of educational reform efforts, be they initiatives or policies, is dependent on their ability to alter power relations in the school context, power relations are not solely relegated to those in the "encapsulated" school system. In this case, the success of the implementation of the policy would need to consider the alterations of power relations of Buena Vista's teachers, administrators, students, the district with its community, the district with the state, and the border's community with the dominant social community.

The superficial conception of how complicated settings such as schools are organized and function marks the basis for reform to fail. According to Sarason, superficial conception fails to include the: (1) recognition that schools should exist co-equally for our children and educational personnel, (2) confrontation of unchallenged assumptions so effectively assimilated by us in the course of our socialization into society, and (3) unchallenged beliefs regarding power. "Countless efforts at change fail because they do not impact the culture of the school and the profession of teaching," says Fullan (1990, (p. 352).

The theoretical assertions of Fullan and Sarason frame the discussion of the findings and their implications for developing reform policies such as the Texas high-stakes testing policy. My understanding of Fullan's and Sarason's assertions about successful reform changes and policies raised several questions to consider in relation to the goal of high-stakes testing policy:

How well does the high-stakes testing policy and the role it plays in the state's accountability system take into account the realistic dynamics and complexity of school cultures? The current policy does not take into account the complexity of the school culture nor the complexity of the culture found in border communities. The following findings illustrate some of the dynamics and consequences that illustrate the failure of this policy to meet Sarason's and Fullan's proposition for success:

- The achievement of the more English proficient students is measured and the test procedures exclude the academic progression of LEP students. The inclusion of a Spanish TAAS adds to the complexity by introducing another element into the difficult assessment decision of when to transition children into English and to what extent to continue Spanish instruction. Further, special education students are also placed at an instructional disadvantage. They are not only unilaterally excluded from the exams due to misunderstanding of the policy provisions, but are also excluded from learning opportunities in the classroom construed as "TAAS-focused" based on the assumption that these students are "exempt anyway".
- A state rating of *exemplary* would suggest that the elementary school students would be "learning" more, but cohort analysis of students in this district indicated that more academic gains were actually made between 8th and 10th grades. Thus, exemptions of students in certain schools can mask the academic gains made at other campuses whose students are no longer eligible for state-sanctioned exemptions.
- The policy and school rating system do not take into account contextual factors which may impede the success of border schools, such as their geographic isolation, access to mainstream experiences, the reality of flood prone school zones which physically affect student access to school facilities, the fiscal constraints placed on the district given the economy of the region, and the ever-present ebb and flow of the daily inter-cultural exchanges that exists between the border communities and their sister cities.
- The unequal distribution and quality of bilingual, ESL and special education programs and teachers across the state and the region also is a contextual factor that plays a role. Due to the shortage of bilingual teachers and special education teachers, students with the greatest English linguistic or academic disadvantages are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers and non-certified teachers who may or may not be culturally sensitive or informed of best practices. Despite these obvious institutional barriers to quality learning opportunities, such students are still held to the high-stakes testing standards.

Has this policy implementation changed the fundamental culture of Buena Vista schools? Sarason also observes. "Despite the many and obvious ways in which schools differ, they are amazingly similar in terms of classroom organization, atmosphere, and rationale for learning. We all have been socialized most defectively to accept the power relationships characteristic of our schools as right, natural, and proper, outcomes to the contrary notwithstanding" (1991, p. 7).

- There were several changes made in the organizational structure of the schools. The elementary campus was divided into three distinct campuses. The intermediate campus opted to adopt a school-with-in-a-

school model, the middle school organized itself into academic teams and the high school chose to implement a block schedule. None of these organizational structures, however, really changed the culture of school. The interaction among teachers and students became more frequent as a result of the changes, but the changes did not significantly change the nature of the relationships.

- Classroom observations confirmed that changes in the appearance of the classroom were made, the dynamics of teaching and learning had not been altered. A traditional school culture remained the norm. If anything, the implementation of the policy had reinforced the entrenched view that some students are disabled and exempt from learning whereas other students, especially the more predominantly English speakers, are accountable for passing standards.
- The one area where change was noted in this case was the advocacy for professional development and the inclusion of educators as learners. Efforts to open access to conferences to both women and men was a new phenomena. Campus administrators were also encouraged to participate in the state's initiative to visit other campuses and opportunities for teachers to visit other campuses were also observed.

Power has traditionally been defined as possessing control, or authority, or influence over others (Sarason, 1991, p. 49). Sarason challenges us to consider that in educational context, the persons who are in the positions of most influence are the ones that have the least power — teachers and students. This was true in this case. The voice of the borderland educators was not visible in the actual policy provisions and the following are examples of the absence of Hispanic influence in the policy:

- The absence of provisions that take into account the large numbers of LEP students at the secondary level. The policy provisions addressed the presence of LEP students at the elementary level but the only needs of LEP students addressed by the policy at the secondary level were those of recent immigrants students. Even if a student arrived as a freshman, mastery of the English graduation test was required.
- The policy includes an underlying belief that accepts as truth the assumption that issues related to primary language instruction (in this case Spanish) and transition into an English curriculum are limited to the elementary campus levels. It is a universally accepted truth that students at the high school level are functioning at high levels of English proficiency and have been doing so for several years. This assumption belies the reality of Buena Vista's experiences at the high school. The majority of students are not functioning at high levels of English proficiency and the international context of the community assures the continuation of LEP students enrolling in the district, especially at the secondary level.

Sarason also insists that "to alter the power status of teachers and parents, however necessary and desirable (and problematic), without altering power relationships in the classroom, is to limit drastically the chances of improving educational outcomes. Had power relationships been altered in the culture of Buena Vista?

- There was a change in the power relationships at the governance level as manifested in the change in board membership and educational paradigm direction. The change in board membership was precipitated by the dissatisfaction in the progress of student performance as measured by the TAAS and

public perception that change was needed. The new board hired a new superintendent and he was charged with propelling the school improvement efforts forward.

- The new superintendent introduced an open communication system that placed greater responsibility and power for change at the campus levels. Principals reported that they had more access to funding programs, hiring decisions on their campus, and implementing instructional design. These functions were new to the principals' realm of influence. Additionally, stronger communication networks were put in place to facilitate and coordinate activities and programs across the district.
- Teachers were also beginning to have more voice in the governance issues by their participation on campus site-based teams and district committees. However, this voice was limited to their school context. For the most part, the teachers' role and influence on educational matters had not been altered to any great extent. Their distress with the policy demands and their perception that it was antithetical to their belief of what good teaching entails is a good example of the conflicting nature of the policy and the little influence they felt they had in its implementation at the district level.
- Classroom observations revealed that very little had been done to alter classroom power relations among students and teachers. The expectation of the student as traditional learner was evident. Some teachers were introducing cooperative learning and were attempting to change their instructional strategies to be more inclusive of students' different learning styles.

Many teachers observed and commented that these type of dynamic instructional changes were difficult to implement given the nature of the tests and its emphasis on discrete skills and its strong influence over instruction. From these teachers perspectives, the means in this case was becoming the ends – TAAS had voice and influence, TAAS had power in the classroom.

Have assumptions been challenged in the course of the policy's implementation? The explicitly and implicit assumptions underlying high-stakes testing have already been discussed. This case study identified outcomes that questioned the validity of these assumptions and challenged me to reconsider the efficacy of adhering to the rigid thinking that forms the basis of such reform efforts. Therefore, the following observed outcomes are intended to challenge the premise that high-stakes testing has benefited *all* students.

- The intersection of high-stakes testing and its strong emphasis on English vocabulary and cultural concepts complicated the assessment of student performance at the middle school and high school level.
- Although the number of officially identified high school LEP students may have been less than fifty percent of the student body (except for last year when the percentage increased to 60 percent), issues of vocabulary, cognitive and concept development, assessment and transition into an all English curricula and instructional setting continue to plague the majority of the secondary student body. The assumption supported by the policy that students are English proficient by the time they reach middle and high school levels masks the reality of the diversity of those levels of proficiency.
- The use of exemptions to protect students from what was generally regarded as an inappropriate test had the consequence of creating an illusion of successful schools and low-performing schools.

- Although the elementary campus was rated *exemplary* by the state, the possibility was raised that the high-stakes exam is simply a measure of how well the more English proficient students performed at the elementary level.

Concluding Comments

The review of the literature identified a recurring pattern of American schools depending on the use of tests and test scores to make judgments regarding students' abilities and their placement in special learning programs. The case was made that high-stakes testing policy, like other educational reform policies in the past, is a response to the public's perception that an educational crisis is in need of attention. It has been suggested in the literature that current educational reform policies, including high-stakes testing policy, are symbolic gestures to assuage the public's demands for more order and effectiveness (Airasian, 1988; Ellwein, Glass and Smith, 1988; Wise, 1979). In the process of giving the impression that serious educational problems are being rectified, unintended outcomes may be having deleterious effects on the very students the policy is purported to benefit (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1993; Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard, 1991; Gottfredson, 1986).

When the same set of standards is applied to all schools and consequences are set for failing to reach those standards, as in high-stakes testing, the policy assumes that all schools function alike, are organized alike, and respond similarly to outside pressures. Reyes and Valencia (1993) argue that policymakers have failed to recognize that each community contain a unique set of expectations, pool of resources, and values which govern how policy is implemented, what curriculum is acceptable, and how problems will be defined and addressed.

High-stakes testing policy provisions failed to be sensitive to the complexity language experience found in the borderland community of Buena Vista. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of students could be identified as "intermediate" English speakers but were subject to the vocabulary and linguistic expectations for native English speakers taking the exams also raised a validity question on the tests. The policy and accountability system do not take into account contextual factors critical to the success of border schools, such as geographic isolation, access to mainstream experiences, and the ever-present ebb and flow of inter cultural exchanges between border communities. Other contextual factors to consider are the quality of bilingual and ESL programs and teachers. Border schools, for example, given their large number of limited English proficient students, would be expected to have extensive bilingual education programs. Given the state's shortage of bilingual teachers, however, students with the greatest linguistic disadvantages are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers and non-certified bilingual teachers who may or may not be culturally sensitive. Despite these obvious institutional barriers to quality learning opportunities, such students are still held to the high-stakes testing standards.

Border schools, their resources, the communities they serve, and students' educational experiences, are dramatically different from other Texas schools. A high-stakes testing policy assumes that schools are alike and attempts to legislate the standardization of curriculum and graduation criteria. It is clear that Mexican-American children living along the border, in schools with limited resources, taught by teachers who are often novices or culturally removed, may not benefit from a policy that assumes the homogeneity of schools and students.

References

Airasian, P.W. (1988). Symbolic validation: the case of state-mandated, high stakes testing. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 10 (4), 301-313.

Allington, R. & McGill-Franzen, A. (1992). Does high-stakes testing improve school effectiveness? ERS Spectrum, 10 (2), 3-12.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1987). Over-regulated curriculum and the press for teacher professionalism. NASSP Bulletin, 71 (498), 22-29.

Easton, D. (1965). A Framework for Political Analysis. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Edelman, M. (1964). The Symbolic Uses of Politics. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Educational Economic Policy Committee (1994). Texas Public School Accountability: A Report Card on Implementation of the System. Austin, TX: Author.

Foley, D.E. (1990). Learning Capital Culture: Deep in the Heart of Texas. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fullan, M.G. (199). Change Forces. NY: Teacher's College Press.

Fullan, M.G. (1991). The New Meaning of Educational Change. NY: Teacher's College Press.

Gibbs, C.V. & Murphy, P. (1994). A Fair Test? Assessment, Achievement and Equity. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Gottfredson, G.D. (1986). You Can't Get What You Measure, You Get What You Don't: Higher Standards, Higher Test Scores, More Retention in Grade (Report No. 2). Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, John Hopkins University.

Kirst, M. (1990). Recent state education reforms in the united states: looking backward and forward. Educational Administration Quarterly, 24 (3), 319-328.

Koretz, D.M., Linn, R.L., Dunbar, S.B. & Shepard, L.A. (1991, April 5). The Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Achievement: Preliminary Findings about Generalization across Tests. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. Ed. 340 730)

McKinney, J.D. & Haskins, K.G. (1980). Performance of Exceptional Students on the North Carolina Minimum Competency Test, 1978-1979. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Report Submitted to North Carolina State Board of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. Ed 193 236)

Merriam, S.B. (1988). Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Montejano, D. (1989). Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Oakes, J. (1985). Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.

Patton, M.Q. (1980). Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods (Second Edition). Newbury Park: Sage.

Popham, W.J., Cruse, K.L., Ranking, S.C., Sandifer, P.W. & Williams, P.L. (1985). Measurement driven instruction: it's on the road. Phi Delta Kappan, 66 (9), 628-634.

Potter, D.C. & Wall, M.E. (1992, April). Higher Standards for Grade Promotion and Graduation: Unintended Effects of Reform. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.(ERIC Reproduction Service 348 750).

Presseisen, B.Z. (1985). Unlearned Lessons: Current and Past Reforms for School Improvement. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Reyes, P. & Valencia, R. (1993). Educational policy and the growing latino population: problems and prospects. Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 15 (2), 258-283.

Reyes, P., Velez, W., & Peña, R. (1993). School reform: introducing race, culture, and ethnicity into the discourse. In C.A. Capper (Ed.), Educational Administration In A Pluralistic Society (66-85). Albany, NY: State University Of New York.

Rist, R.C. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: the self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. Harvard Education Review, 40, 411-451.

Rottenberg, C. & Smith, M.L. (1990, April). Unintended Effects of External Testing in Elementary Schools. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the AERA Association, Boston.

Sarason, S.E. (1990). The Predictable Failure of Educational School Reform: Can We Change Course Before It's Too Late? San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Sarason, S.E. (1996). Revisiting the Culture of the School and the Problem of Change. NY: Teacher's College.

Shepard, L.A. (1990). Inflated test score gains: is the problem old norms or teaching the test? Educational Measurement: Issues And Practices, 9, 15-22.

Shepard, L.A. (1992). Will National Tests Improve Student Learning? (CSE Technical Report 342). Boulder, CO: University of Colorado.

Smith, M.L., Edelsky, C., Draper, K., Rottenberg, C., & Cherland, M. (1990). The Role of Testing in Elementary Schools. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, University of California.

South, J. (1994, September 10). Is TAAS a valid yardstick? Austin-American Statesman, A1, A6.

Stanfield, J.H. & Dennis, R.M. (1993). Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods. Newbury Park: Sage.

Texas Education Agency (1994). Academic Excellence Indicator System - District and Campus Reports 1993-94 (District No. 214903). Austin, TX: Division Of Performance Reporting.

Texas Education Agency (1995). Academic Excellence Indicator System - District and Campus Reports 1994-95 (District No. 214903). Austin, TX: Division of Performance Reporting.

Texas Education Agency (1995). Accountability Manual: The 1995 Accountability Rating System for Texas Public Schools and School Districts and Blueprint for the 1996 - 2000 Accountability System. Austin, TX: Office of Policy Planning and Information Management.

U.S. Bureau of Census (1991, September). 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File, 1-A. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.

Valencia, R. (Ed.), (1993). Chicano School Failure and Success: Research and Policy Agendas for the 1990s. New York: Falmer.

Wise, A.E. (1979). Legislated Learning. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Yin, R.K. (1994). Case Study Research: Design and Methods. (Second Edition). Thousand Oaks: Sage.